

## **Archaeologists Aid Cultural Preservation in Honduras**

The Minister of Culture and Ambassador Ford visited U.S. archaeologists William and Barbara Fash and Harvard field students on July 15 at the Mayan ruins of Copan to give public attention to U.S. efforts to help archaeological preservation in Honduras. As well as playing an important role in the laboratory, ongoing research, and the sculpture museum, the team is involved in issues such as the preservation of the Hieroglyphic Staircase and new technology that may lead to cracking the Stairway's text.



**Harvard Field Students at Copan**

### **U.S. Plays a Vital Role in Copan Research**

Since the first visit of American John Lloyd Stephens in 1839, the U.S. has played an important role in the research of Copan. Stephens' interest in the Mayan ruins was peaked by Central American explorer Juan Galindo's description in 1834. The North American explorer, travel writer, and diplomat John Lloyd Stephens and English architect and draftsman Frederick Catherwood traveled to Copan where Stephens was so captivated that he promptly purchased the site -- today owned by the Honduran government -- from its then owner, an Indian named Don Jose Maria.

The site was the subject of one of the first modern archeological surveys and excavations in the Maya area, conducted by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of Harvard University from 1891 to 1900. Further excavations and restorations were begun



**Visit to the laboratory Centro Regional de Investigaciones Arqueologicas**

by the Carnegie Institution of Washington in the 1930s, the Peabody Museum again in the 1970s, followed by the Government of Honduras's *Proyecto Copán* beginning in the late 1970s and continuing to this day.

USAID funded multi-phase projects of Copan archaeological research and conservation from 1988-1995 under the direction of William Fash. USAID also funded the installation of the 60 exhibitions in the Copan Sculpture Museum from 1993-1996. More recently, from 1995 to the present William Fash, Barbara Fash, and David Stuart have directed archaeological research and archaeological field schools in Copan. Collaborating with the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IAHA), U.S. experts and institutions continue to make an important contribution to the understanding of the Mayan civilization of Copan through ongoing research.

## **The Copan Hieroglyphic Stairway Research**

Dr. William Fash and Barbara Fash, 30-year veterans of scholarly research on Copan, provided Ambassador Ford in his recent visit to Copan with a firsthand understanding of one of the most urgent and compelling projects currently underway at Copan – the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Long appreciated for its historical significance and stunning beauty, the Hieroglyphic Stairway of the Classic Maya archaeological site of Copan, Honduras is the longest surviving hieroglyphic inscription of the Pre-Columbian Americas. Bearing over 1,200 individual glyph blocks (and twice that many individual signs), the stairway represents an encyclopedic treatment of the political history of one of the most distinguished and long-lived cities of ancient Mesoamerica. Scholars are now in the position to decipher that history at a level of detail and understanding not heretofore possible. Remarkable recent advances in the decipherment of the script, an exhaustive documentation of each individual glyph block with the accompanying pictorial imagery, and the meticulous documentation of the architectural history of the building make this the ideal time to bring this complex endeavor to final completion and publication.



**Barbara Fash, Ambassador Ford, William Fash, and Mrs. Ford at the Hieroglyphic Stairway**

In an effort to save the inscription for the future, the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH) requested Barbara Fash to investigate the various methods of replicating the glyphic blocks through digital technology in 2000. Her study resulted in the exploration of various scanning and photogrammetric techniques that would not physically damage the already fragile inscription. The most promising outcome of this research was the discovery that the 1891-1895 glass plate negatives resulting from the Peabody Museum's expeditions and more recent stereo images of the presently eroded glyphs could be virtually recoupled. This allows the viewer to effectively revert to the 1895 conditions of the glyphs, at the moment of their discovery. The combination of the new technology and the present scholarly team presents a unique opportunity to step back in time to reproduce the Hieroglyphic Stairway in its original form. The "virtual" reconstruction can be used to create solid models of the glyphs, at any scale, from tiny to full-sized.



Since the Hieroglyphic Stairway is the primary reason why UNESCO declared Copan a World Heritage Site, this work has an importance and an impact that goes far beyond the

particulars of historiography and archaeology at this site. The Getty Conservation Institute recently completed an eight-year condition and environmental study of the stairway in an effort to determine the causes for its deterioration and will present a long-term plan for the preservation of this priceless cultural legacy.

The IHAH is presently interested in finding international support for this important endeavor to interpret and reproduce the Hieroglyphic Staircase, in order to produce a complete copy of the stairs in their original state, reconstructed in their proper order. Such an accomplishment would save this important and unique document of ancient Maya history for generations to come.

For further information:

Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH): <http://www.ihah.hn/index.htm>

Asociacion Copan: [http://www.asociacioncopan.org/sobre\\_el\\_sitio.htm](http://www.asociacioncopan.org/sobre_el_sitio.htm)

Peabody Museum: <http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/>

Nova Online: "Lost King of the Maya":  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2804maya.html>

Nova Online: "Tour Copan with David Stuart"  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/maya/copan.html>

William Fash: "Saving the Maya Past for the Future"  
<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/profiles/fash.html>

David Stuart: "The Copan Notes"  
<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/profiles/fash.html>